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DE RUEHNE #0944/01 1281403
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 081403Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6524
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7641
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 3386
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 6342
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1728
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1335
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 7995
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 8300
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000944

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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 2009: DELHI POLLS PEACEFUL, VOTER
TURNOUT HIGHER THAN EXPECTED

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On May 7, the fourth phase of the election, PolOff and PolFSN visited several polling sites in three of the seven parliamentary districts in the Delhi Capital Territory (DCT). The voting process for the average voter seems to be orderly and well-established. Election day passed quietly with voters trickling to the polls throughout the day. The DCT's seven districts averaged a 53% turnout, with some of the urban middle class areas turning in much higher rates than expected.

Delhi Polls Quiet

¶2. (SBU) All of the neighborhoods we visited were quiet, even the neighborhood around the Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in India in a district that the Election Commission designated as particularly sensitive because of the mix of a large Muslim population combined with a strong base of support for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party among the Jain and merchant community. Most businesses were shuttered under the mandatory rules for giving employees time off to vote. The Times of India reported that 53% of Delhi's electorate turned out to exercise their franchise, six percent higher than in the 2004 election. Contrary to traditional stereotypes, some of the highest voter participation rates were in the more urban, middle class districts, not the rural areas of the DCT. This change was probably due to Delhi's voter awareness campaign.

¶3. (SBU) At several of the polling sites we visited, the set up was the same: a local school was used for the polling station, a few people trickling in and out, a tented assistance table for the Election Commission, and a Congress party table and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) table set up outside of 100 meters from the polling booth. Occasionally other parties would also set up tables. The tables usually had a small group of voters hanging about talking to the party workers. Some polling stations that were considered more sensitive had an obvious police presence, complete with police officers checking IDs at the gates to the school, barriers closing off or limiting traffic, and other officers posted in the vicinity armed with lathis, long wooden sticks used for crowd control.

Voting Process Multi-Step

¶4. (SBU) At the school-turned-polling station we visited in a well-to-do neighborhood of high rises in West Delhi, security was lax and PolOff was allowed to enter unchallenged with POLFSN who had voted there earlier that morning. The school's ground floor classrooms were designated as polling booths for distinct neighborhoods. For example, the classroom we saw was designated to handle 1227 voters that day, according to the sign posted outside it. A list of the candidates, their party affiliation, and the party symbol were posted outside of each classroom. The party symbol is key because a high percentage of Indian voters cannot read. Poll workers check each person's ID, cross them off the voter list, and then mark the voter's finger with ink in an effort to prevent the voter from casting more than one ballot. In the classroom we saw, the voter would then use the lone electronic voting machine set on a small table in a corner and screened by what looked like a piece of cardboard only a couple of feet high and around three feet across. Nevertheless, it was enough to keep the voter's selection private.

¶5. (SBU) The Election Commission manages voter assistance tables outside each polling station and some parties do as well, although the party-sponsored tables have to be set up 100 meters or more from the polling station. Upon visiting one of these tables, we saw that the process of determining which polling booth/classroom within the polling station a voter should use can be somewhat complicated in a high population density urban area such as Delhi. Each voter is

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assigned to a polling booth according to the voter registration number listed on his/her voter identification card. One man showed us his card; it included his name, picture, and listed other details such as his father's name. If the voter does not have the ID card, he/she can still vote if they can produce some form of official identification, but the identification of the registration number and polling booth takes a longer time. First the voter number is found on the voter registration lists using the address provided. Then another list is consulted to find the assigned polling booth. The staff then give the voter a slip of paper with the information so they can go vote.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The Election Commission over time appears to have refined the Indian election process to a fine art to ensure free and fair elections -- at least in Delhi, Poloff saw no opportunity for any corruption in the voting process. The higher than expected voter turnout in Delhi indicates that the voter awareness campaigns by the government and some private organizations have been successful and deflated some myths about the cynicism of the urban middle class. The democratic process in the DCT seems to have gone off relatively smoothly and peacefully.
BURLEIGH